

# Shakespeare, Wilcox, and Taymor: The Tempest and the concept of adaptation

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



When analyzing two film adaptations of William Shakespeare's 1610 play *The Tempest*, it becomes clear that the word "adaptation" is merely a broad term that barely describes the translations and deviations evidenced by the films themselves. Fred M. Wilcox's 1956 film, *Forbidden Planet*, and Julie Taymor's 2010 film *The Tempest* seem like entirely different pieces compared to the standard Shakespearean original. However, that they are both adaptations of the same story proves that the concept of adaptation is both a multilayered and a very much generalized notion. In this particular example of adaptation, the definition being used is: "The action or process of altering, amending, or modifying something, esp. something that has been created for a particular purpose, so that it is suitable for a new use". These two films do not only modify *The Tempest* to suit it for the nature of each particular adaptation; they put the non-specific nature of the term "adaptation" into question as each piece translates and deviates further and further from Shakespeare's original text.

As bizarre as it sounds, *Forbidden Planet* is perhaps one of the most faithful adaptations of *The Tempest*. Both works deal with flawed protagonists, the allure of power, and the relationship between man and monster. Prospero, like *Forbidden Planet*'s Morbius, is a difficult character to like. While explaining his reason for being on the island, Prospero admits that during his time as Duke, he "...[neglected] all worldly ends, all dedicated to closeness and the bettering of my mind..." (Shakespeare, 106). His one-sided explanation shows that Prospero refuses to take even partial responsibility for the failure of his tenure as the Duke. His concentration on freeing himself from man's necessary role in society, even if in the name of knowledge, is

frustrating, as it cuts him off from the realities all people must face. Morbius too exemplifies this isolation and for most of the climax of the film refuses to take responsibility for his role in the creation of the monster. Even though he knows the truth, Morbius says over Doc's dead body, "Let him be buried with the other victims of greed and human folly" (Wilcox, *Forbidden Planet*). He says this as though he is exempt from this punishment, even though he surely knows that he too is a victim of such "greed and human folly" in the film. Morbius' placing of himself above human nature is an example of how he, like Prospero, is intent on keeping himself from the truths of reality. Because of this struggle that both characters face, Morbius is a translation of Prospero, modified to only to fit a different setting of the story.

The allure of power is a common and very important theme in both works. In *The Tempest*, Prospero displays his power through his magical skill and control over characters such as Caliban and Ariel. Prospero's magical strength is admitted by Caliban, who says in an aside, "His art is of such power, It would control my dam's god Setebos And make a vassal of him" (Shakespeare, 121). The terrifying realism of Prospero's brand of magic, exemplified by the tempest in the beginning of the play, creates physical manifestations that assert his power over others. The fact that he is willing to give up magic by the end of the play marks a real growth in character within Prospero. *Forbidden Planet* takes this allure to new lengths, both technological and psychological. Morbius is able to double his intellect permanently, which enables him to enact the technological feats seen in the film, such as Robby the Robot (Wilcox, *Forbidden Planet*). In a clear parallel,

Prospero's power comes from his magic, while Morbius' power comes from technology. Morbius' obsession with power, shown through his technological capabilities, prevents him from taking responsibility in the creation of the id monster. While this difference in character does label him a partial perversion of Prospero's character, the continuity in the theme of power should not be ignored when analyzing this adaptation of *The Tempest*, as it shows the continuity between the two pieces.

Heavily featured in *The Tempest* and *Forbidden Planet* is the relationship between man and beast. In Shakespeare's work, the man is Prospero and the monster is Caliban, the original inhabitant of the island. Caliban is the embodiment of the ugliness of Prospero's situation, an example being Caliban's suggestion that his island being taken from him is much like Prospero's dukedom being stolen. While different in physical nature, Prospero and Caliban have very similar arguments and mindsets that make them comparable, if not similar, characters. In *Forbidden Planet*, the monster literally is a manifestation of Morbius himself. Commander Adams angrily tries to get Morbius to understand that, "We're all part monsters in our subconscious, so we have laws and religion", things that Morbius believes himself to be exempt from (Wilcox, *Forbidden Planet*). The relationship between Morbius and the id monster takes the relationship between Prospero and Caliban to unprecedented, Freudian levels of understanding. In fact, the relationship, like the earlier stated characterization and themes, links *The Tempest* to *Forbidden Planet* directly.

Much as *Forbidden Planet* translates the story of *The Tempest* for the purposes of science fiction, Julie Taymor's 2010 adaptation deviates from the original material in order to appeal to a modern audience, while not categorizing itself as a "modern adaptation". While the story generally remains faithful to Shakespeare's text, the interpretations of the characters of Prospero and Caliban stylize the adaptation into a film that is consumable by a twenty-first century audience.

The most obvious example of such deviation is the changing of Prospero to a woman, who is called Prospera. Prospera's backstory is that she was "wife to him that ruled Milan" and that upon his death, the dukedom was conferred to Prospera, whose brother conspired to steal it from her (Taymor, *The Tempest*). While this is a difference from Prospero's backstory, this digression does nothing to alter what is important to the plot: Prospera's desire for vengeance and never-ending quest for knowledge. Thus, Taymor presents the audience of 2010 with a feminist and distinctly modern approach to the original text. The personality and motivation of Prospero, Taymor argues, isn't limited by his gender, and in viewing the film it is clear that changing Prospero's gender doesn't render this adaptation an unfaithful one. Prospera now caters not only to Shakespeare's original outline of Prospero, but also to the independent, self-sufficient view of womanhood that contemporary feminism idealizes.

The portrayal of Caliban is perhaps the more controversial characterization that Taymor presents. In "The Persons of the Play" section before the text, Caliban is written as "a savage and deformed slave" (Shakespeare, 96). In

Taymor's film, Caliban is played by Beninese-American actor Djimon Hounsou, and is shown having scaled, cracked flesh and a partially white face, in sharp contrast to his dark skin. While his makeup does show him to be the "deformed" slave that Shakespeare writes, Caliban is the only actor who isn't of Caucasian ethnicity and is the villain of the piece. Included in the film is the suggestion that Caliban at one point tried to rape Miranda, both the text and the film featuring the line "...till thou didst seek to violate the honour of my child", at which Caliban laughs mockingly (Shakespeare, 120) (Taymor, *The Tempest*). It is almost a given that in the early days of *The Tempest* as a stage production, Caliban was played by white actors. However, an adaptation by an American director invites a whole new level of questioning when Caliban is shown as dark skinned. To some, it is a reminder of the racism of the "evil black man" character seen in 19th and 20th century American literature. Despite this, I believe the casting of Hounsou as Caliban is another deviating yet modernizing aspect of the film. As American history portrays the black man as one struggling for the independence of personhood, Caliban's ethnicity in the film mirrors his pursuit of sovereignty over an island that is truly his and independence from those who hold him as a slave. Rather than a possible effort to convey "color-blind casting", Caliban's race in the film is a reflection upon ongoing American history itself, which updates the character of Caliban and thus makes his struggle understandable to a contemporary audience.

How can a 17th century play, a 1950s science fiction film, and a desperately unique 21st century Julie Taymor film all be connected? To say that

Forbidden Planet and Taymor's The Tempest are adaptations of Shakespeare's text is too broad of an assumption. The definition of adaptation suggests that these filmmakers have taken one thing and shaped it into another, but analyzing these new products they've created has led to the conclusion that these versions are translations and deviations rather than simply adaptations. Forbidden Planet translates Shakespeare's text to suit a science fiction setting that audiences would enjoy and a post-Freud world that the audiences themselves lived in. Taymor's The Tempest is faithful to the setting and plot but deviates in order to create characters relatable to the real world of the audience, particularly regarding discriminatory ideologies against women and people of color. Neither film is unfaithful to The Tempest and neither attempts to distort it; analyzing each film brings to light the multifaceted nature of adaptation and proves that it is a term suited only to general categorizations.